

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA**

ERICK GATHERS and TOM BROWN,  Plaintiffs,  v.  QSC LLC,  Defendant.	Civil Action No. 2:21-cv-1763  COMPLAINT FOR DECLARATORY AND INJUNCTIVE RELIEF
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**COMPLAINT FOR DECLARATORY AND INJUNCTIVE RELIEF**

ERICK GATHERS and TOM BROWN (“Plaintiffs”), by and through undersigned counsel, seek a permanent injunction requiring a change in QSC LLC.’s (“QSC”, and “Defendant”) corporate policies to cause its digital properties to become, and remain, accessible to individuals with visual disabilities. In support thereof, Plaintiffs respectfully assert as follows:

**INTRODUCTION**

1. This action arises from Defendant’s failure to make its digital properties accessible to legally blind individuals, which violates the effective communication and equal access requirements of Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”), 42 U.S.C. §§ 12181-12189.

2. It is estimated that 2.3 percent of the American population lives with some sort of visual disability. *See* Erickson, W., Lee, C., von Schrader, S., Disability Statistics from the American Community Survey (ACS). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Yang-Tan Institute (YTI), available at [www.disabilitystatistics.org](http://www.disabilitystatistics.org) (last accessed December 3, 2021).

3. For this significant portion of Americans, accessing digital platforms, mobile applications, and other information via their smartphones has become critical, especially during

the current COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, this discrimination is particularly acute during the pandemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (“CDC”), Americans living with disabilities are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19 and, therefore, are recommended to shelter in place throughout the duration of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> This underscores the importance of access to online retailers, such as Defendant, for this especially vulnerable population.

4. During these challenging times, disabled individuals risk losing their jobs, experiencing difficulty acquiring goods and services like health care, and being deprived of the information they need to stay safe. *See* Slate, *The Inaccessible Internet 2020*, available at <https://slate.com/technology/2020/05/disabled-digital-accessibility-pandemic.html> (last accessed December 3, 2021).

5. At the same time, the share of Americans who own smartphones has climbed from just 35% in 2011 to 81% in 2019—amounting to more than 265 million people in the United States. *See* U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. and World Population Clock, available at <https://www.census.gov/popclock/> (last accessed December 3, 2021) (U.S. population on June 12, 2019 was 328.1 million).

6. In this climate, it is especially important to consider factors that can facilitate or impede technology adoption and use by people with disabilities. National Council on Disability,

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<sup>1</sup> *See* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Digital Platform, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (2019)*, available at [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fspecific-groups%2Fhigh-risk-complications.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fspecific-groups%2Fhigh-risk-complications.html) (last accessed December 3, 2021) (“Based on currently available information and clinical expertise, older adults and people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions might be at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19.”).

*National Disability Policy: A Progress Report* (Oct. 7, 2016), available at [https://ncd.gov/sites/default/files/NCD\\_ProgressReport\\_ES\\_508.pdf](https://ncd.gov/sites/default/files/NCD_ProgressReport_ES_508.pdf) (last accessed December 3, 2021).

7. Properly formatted, digital content is universally accessible to everyone. But when it is not, ineffective communication results. In those situations, legally blind individuals must unnecessarily expend additional time and effort to overcome communication barriers sighted users do not confront. These barriers may require the assistance of third parties or, in some cases, may deny outright access to the online service. See Kasey Wehrum, Inc., *Your Digital Platform is Scaring Customers Away. 5 Easy Ways to Fix It* (Jan. 2014), available at <https://www.inc.com/magazine/201312/kasey-wehrum/how-to-get-online-customers-to-complete-purchase.html> (last accessed December 3, 2021).

8. Screen access “software translates the visual internet into an auditory equivalent. At a rapid pace, the software reads the content of a webpage to the user.” *Andrews v. Blink Art Materials, LLC*, 17-CV-767, 2017 WL 6542466, at \*6 (E.D.N.Y. Dec. 21, 2017) (J. Weinstein).

The screen reading software uses auditory cues to allow a visually impaired user to effectively use digital platforms. For example, when using the visual internet, a seeing user learns that a link may be “clicked,” which will bring him to another webpage, through visual cues, such as a change in the color of the text (often text is turned from black to blue). When the sighted user's cursor hovers over the link, it changes from an arrow symbol to a hand.

The screen reading software uses auditory—rather than visual—cues to relay this same information. When a sight impaired individual reaches a link that may be “clicked on,” the software reads the link to the user, and after reading the text of the link says the word “clickable.”...Through a series of auditory cues read aloud by the screen reader, the visually impaired user can navigate a Digital Platform by listening and responding with his keyboard.

*Id.* at \*6-7.<sup>2</sup>

9. Unfortunately, here Defendant fails to communicate effectively with Plaintiffs because its digital properties are not properly formatted to allow legally blind users such as Plaintiffs to access its digital content. Accordingly, legally blind customers such as Plaintiffs are deprived from accessing information about Defendant's products and using its online services, all of which are readily available to sighted customers.

10. This lawsuit is aimed at providing legally blind users like Plaintiffs a full and equal experience.

### **PARTIES**

11. Plaintiff Gathers is and, at all times relevant hereto, has been a resident of Patterson County, New Jersey. Plaintiff Gathers was born with congenital glaucoma and is totally blind. He uses an iPhone 8 with Voiceover and the screen-reader JAWS. Plaintiff is, and at all times relevant hereto has been, legally blind and is therefore a member of a protected class under the ADA, 42 U.S.C. § 12102(2) and the regulations implementing the ADA set forth at 28 CFR §§ 36.101et seq.

12. Plaintiff Brown is and, at all times relevant hereto, has been a resident of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. Plaintiff Brown is totally blind and uses an iPhone 10 with VoiceOver as well as the screen reader JAWS to navigate the internet. Plaintiff is, and at all times relevant hereto has been, legally blind and is therefore a member of a protected class under the ADA, 42 U.S.C. § 12102(2) and the regulations implementing the ADA set forth at 28 CFR §§ 36.101et seq.

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<sup>2</sup> See American Foundation for the Blind, *Screen Readers*, available at <https://www.afb.org/node/16207/screen-readers> (last accessed December 3, 2021) (discussing screen readers and how they work).

13. Defendant is a California limited liability company with its principal place of business located at 19800 Macarthur Boulevard, Suite 300, Irvine, California, 92612. Defendant is a leader in the design, development, manufacture, and distribution of professional audio equipment under its recognized brand name QSC.

14. Consumers may purchase Defendant's products and access other brand-related content and services at <https://www.qsc.com/> ("Digital Platform"), the Digital Platform Defendant owns, operates, and controls.

15. In addition to researching and purchasing Defendant's products and services from the comfort and convenience of their homes, consumers may also use Defendant's Digital Platform to contact customer service by phone and email, sign up to receive product updates, product news, and special promotions, review important legal notices like Defendant's Privacy Policy and Terms and Conditions, and more.<sup>3</sup>

16. Defendant is responsible for the policies, practices, and procedures concerning the Digital Platform's development and maintenance.

17. Because Defendant's Digital Platform is not and has never been fully accessible, and because upon information and belief Defendant does not have, and has never had, adequate corporate policies that are reasonably calculated to cause its digital properties to become and remain accessible, Plaintiffs invoke 42 U.S.C. § 12188(a)(2) and seeks a permanent injunction requiring Defendant to:

- a) Retain a qualified consultant acceptable to Plaintiffs ("Web Accessibility Consultant") who shall assist in improving the accessibility of its Digital Platform, including all third-party content and plug-ins, so the goods and services on the Digital Platform may be equally accessed and enjoyed by individuals with vision related disabilities;

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Defendant's Home Page, available at <https://www.qsc.com/> (last accessed on December 3, 2021)

- b) Work with the Web Accessibility Consultant to ensure all employees involved in digital platform and content development be given web accessibility training on a biennial basis, including onsite training to create accessible content at the design and development stages;
- c) Work with the Web Accessibility Consultant to perform an automated accessibility audit on a periodic basis to evaluate whether Defendant's Digital Platform may be equally accessed and enjoyed by individuals with vision related disabilities on an ongoing basis;
- d) Work with the Web Accessibility Consultant to perform end-user accessibility/usability testing on at least a quarterly basis with said testing to be performed by humans who are blind or have low vision, or who have training and experience in the manner in which persons who are blind use a screen reader to navigate, browse, and conduct business on digital platforms, in addition to the testing, if applicable, that is performed using semi-automated tools;
- e) Incorporate all of the Web Accessibility Consultant's recommendations within sixty (60) days of receiving the recommendations;
- f) Work with the Web Accessibility Consultant to create a Web Accessibility Policy that will be posted on its Digital Platform, along with an e-mail address, instant messenger, and toll-free phone number to report accessibility-related problems;
- g) Directly link from the footer on each page of its Digital Platform, a statement that indicates that Defendant is making efforts to maintain and increase the accessibility of its Digital Platform to ensure that persons with disabilities have full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations of the Defendant through the Digital Platform;
- h) Accompany the public policy statement with an accessible means of submitting accessibility questions and problems, including an accessible form to submit feedback or an email address to contact representatives knowledgeable about the Web Accessibility Policy;
- i) Provide a notice, prominently and directly linked from the footer on each page of its Digital platform, soliciting feedback from visitors to the Digital Platform on how the accessibility of the Digital Platform can be improved. The link shall provide a method to provide feedback, including an accessible form to submit feedback or an email address to contact representatives knowledgeable about the Web Accessibility Policy;
- j) Provide a copy of the Web Accessibility Policy to all web content personnel, contractors responsible for web content, and Client Service Operations call center agents ("CSO Personnel") for the Digital Platform;
- k) Train no fewer than three of its CSO Personnel to automatically escalate calls from users with disabilities who encounter difficulties using the Digital Platform.

Defendant shall have trained no fewer than 3 of its CSO personnel to timely assist such users with disabilities within CSO published hours of operation. Defendant shall establish procedures for promptly directing requests for assistance to such personnel including notifying the public that customer assistance is available to users with disabilities and describing the process to obtain that assistance;

- l) Modify existing bug fix policies, practices, and procedures to include the elimination of bugs that cause the Digital Platform to be inaccessible to users of screen reader technology;
- m) Plaintiffs, their counsel, and their experts monitor the Digital Platform for up to two years after the Mutually Agreed Upon Consultant validates the Digital Platform are free of accessibility errors/violations to ensure Defendant has adopted and implemented adequate accessibility policies. To this end, Plaintiffs, through their counsel and their experts, shall be entitled to consult with the Web Accessibility Consultant at their discretion, and to review any written material, including but not limited to any recommendations the Digital Platform Accessibility Consultant provides Defendant.

18. Digital platforms have features and content that are modified on a daily, and in some instances an hourly, basis, and a one time “fix” to an inaccessible digital platform will not cause the digital platform to remain accessible without a corresponding change in corporate policies related to those web-based technologies. To evaluate whether an inaccessible digital platform has been rendered accessible, and whether corporate policies related to web-based technologies have been changed in a meaningful manner that will cause the digital platform to remain accessible, the digital platform must be reviewed on a periodic basis using both automated accessibility screening tools and end user testing by disabled individuals.

### **JURISDICTION AND VENUE**

19. The claims alleged arise under Title III such that this Court’s jurisdiction is invoked pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1331 and 42 U.S.C. § 12188.

20. Defendant participates in the Commonwealth’s economic life by performing business over the Internet. Through its Digital Platform, Defendant entered into contracts for the sale of its products and services with residents of Pennsylvania. These online sales contracts

involve, and indeed require, Defendant's knowing and repeated transmission of computer files over the Internet. *See Reed v. 1-800-Flowers.com, Inc.*, 327 F. Supp. 3d 539 (E.D.N.Y. 2018) (exercising personal jurisdiction over forum plaintiff's digital platform accessibility claims against out-of-forum digital platform operator); *Andrews v. Blick Art Materials, LLC*, 286 F. Supp. 3d 365 (E.D.N.Y. 2017) (same).

21. Plaintiffs were injured when they attempted to access Defendant's Digital Platform from their homes in Patterson County and in this District, respectively, when they attempted to buy Defendant's products but encountered barriers that denied them full and equal access to Defendant's online goods, content, and services.

22. Venue in this District is proper under 28 U.S.C. § 1391(b)(2) because this is the judicial district in which a substantial part of the acts and omissions giving rise to Plaintiffs' claim occurred.

### **FACTS APPLICABLE TO ALL CLAIMS**

23. While the increasing pervasiveness of digital information presents an unprecedented opportunity to increase access to goods, content, and services for people with perceptual or motor disabilities, digital platform developers and web content developers often implement digital technologies without regard to whether those technologies can be accessed by individuals with disabilities. This is notwithstanding the fact that accessible technology is both readily available and cost effective.

### **DEFENDANT'S ONLINE CONTENT**

24. Defendant's Digital Platform allows consumers to research and participate in Defendant's services and products from the comfort and convenience of their own homes.



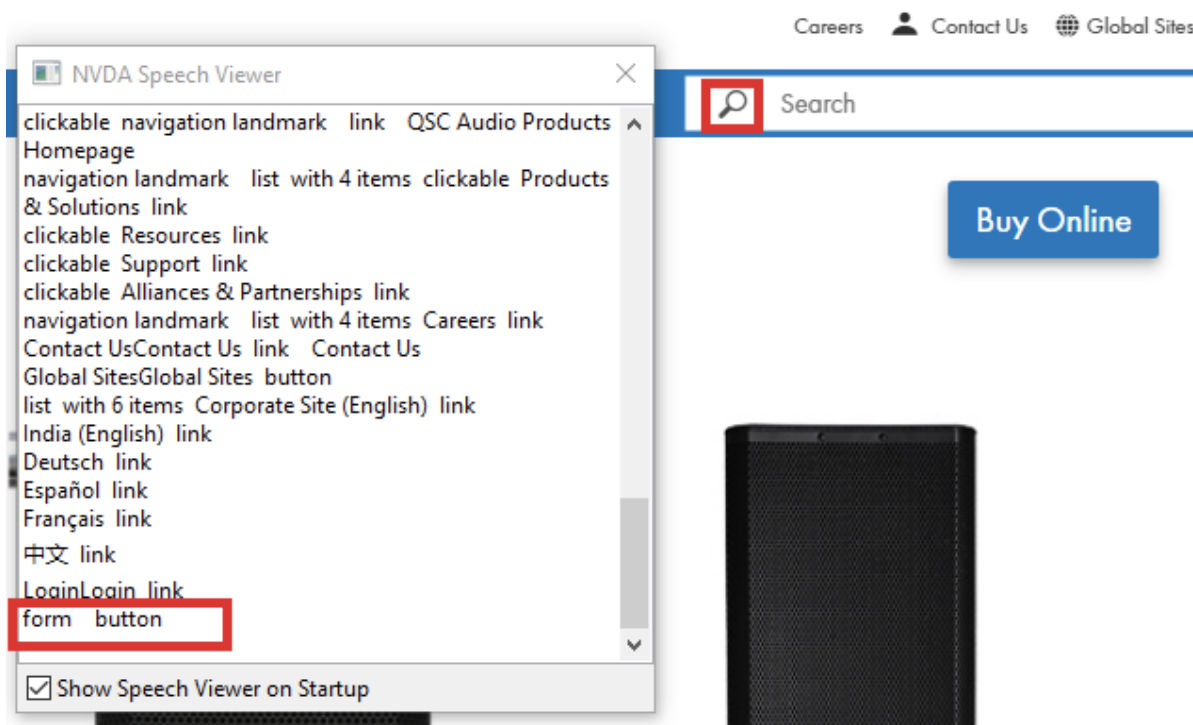
25. The Digital Platform also enables consumers to contact customer service by phone and instant messenger, sign up to receive product updates, product news, and special promotions, review important legal notices like Defendant's Privacy Policy and Terms and Conditions, and more.

26. Consumers may use the Digital Platform to connect with Defendant on social media, using sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.

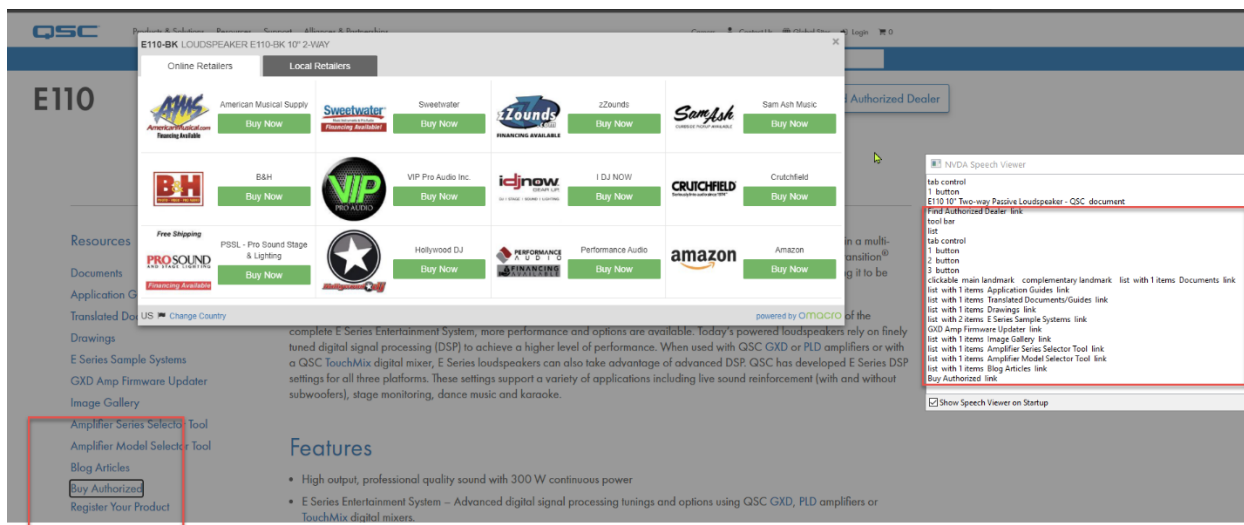
### **HARM TO PLAINTIFFS**

27. Plaintiffs attempted to access the Digital Platform from their homes in Patterson County, New Jersey, and Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, respectively. Unfortunately, because of Defendant's failure to build the Digital Platform in a manner that is compatible with screen access programs, Plaintiffs are unable to understand, and thus are denied the benefit of, much of the content and services they wish to access on the Digital Platform. The following are illustrative (but, importantly, not exhaustive) examples of a few of the accessibility barriers observed on the Digital Platform:

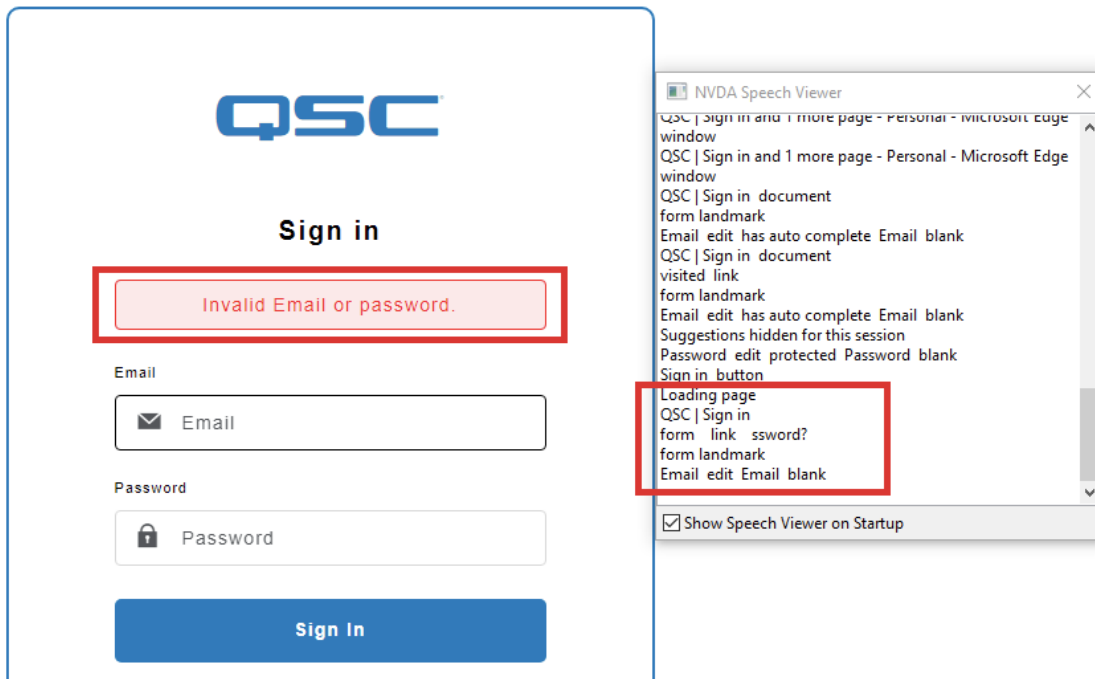
a. On the "e110 Portable PA" product page on Defendant's Digital Platform, the search icon is unlabeled. Instead, the search icon is announced simply as "Form Button". This prevents screen-reader users from finding the search function.



b. When viewing the “e110 Portable PA” product page, a “Find Authorized Dealer” pop-up is displayed, but the focus does not land on the pop-up. Instead, the focus remains on the background elements. Screen-reader users need to press the Tab key several times and traverse the whole page before they reach the pop-up.



c. On the Digital Platform, users can sign into their account to receive product updates, customer support, and other features. When attempting to sign in, if the user makes an error with their sign in credentials, an error message is displayed, but are not identified. These form errors are not announced to screen-reader users. This causes confusion and delays to screen-reader users as they are not notified that an error is present.



28. These barriers, and others, deny Plaintiffs full and equal access to all of the services the Digital Platform offers, and now deter them from attempting to use the Digital Platform to buy Defendant's goods and services. Still, Plaintiffs would like to, and intend to, attempt to access the Digital Platform in the future to research the products and services the Digital Platform offers, or to test the Digital Platform for compliance with the ADA.

29. If the Digital Platform was accessible, *i.e.* if Defendant removed the access barriers described above, Plaintiffs could independently research and purchase Defendant's products and access its other online content and services.

30. The law requires that Defendant reasonably accommodate Plaintiffs' disabilities by removing these existing access barriers. Removal of the barriers identified above is readily achievable and may be carried out without much difficulty or expense.

31. Plaintiffs have been, and in the absence of an injunction will continue to be, injured by Defendant's failure to provide its online content and services in a manner that is compatible with screen reader technology.

### **SUBSTANTIVE VIOLATIONS**

#### **COUNT I**

##### **Title III of the ADA, 42 U.S.C. § 12181 *et seq.***

32. The assertions contained in the previous paragraphs are incorporated by reference.

33. Title III of the ADA guarantees that individuals with disabilities shall have full and equal enjoyment of the products, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, or accommodations of any place of public accommodation.

34. Defendant is bound by the regulations implementing Title III of the ADA, which require that places of public accommodation ensure effective communication to individuals with disabilities. 28 C.F.R. § 303(c).

35. Plaintiffs are legally blind and therefore are individuals with a disability under the ADA.

36. Defendant is a place of public accommodation under the ADA because it is a "sales or rental establishment" and/or "other service establishment." 42 U.S.C. § 12181(7)(E), (F).

37. Title III of the ADA guarantees that individuals with disabilities shall have full and equal enjoyment of the products, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, or accommodations of any place of public accommodation. 42 U.S.C. § 12182; 28 C.F.R. §36.201.

38. Defendant owns, operates, or maintains the Digital Platform.

39. The Digital Platform is a service, facility, privilege, advantage, or accommodation of Defendant. The assertions contained in the previous paragraphs are incorporated by reference.

40. Title III of the ADA guarantees that individuals with disabilities shall have full and equal enjoyment of the products, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, or accommodations of any place of public accommodation.

### **PRAYER FOR RELIEF**

WHEREFORE, Plaintiffs pray for:

(A) A Declaratory Judgment that at the commencement of this action Defendant was in violation of the specific requirements of Title III of the ADA described above, and the relevant implementing regulations of the ADA, in that Defendant took no action that was reasonably calculated to ensure that its Digital Platform was fully accessible to, and independently usable by, individuals with visual disabilities;

(B) A permanent injunction pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 12188(a)(2) and 28 CFR § 36.504(a) which directs Defendant to take all steps necessary to bring its Digital Platform into full compliance with the requirements set forth in the ADA, and its implementing regulations, so that its Digital Platform is fully accessible to, and independently usable by, blind individuals, and which further directs that the Court shall retain jurisdiction for a period to be determined to ensure that Defendant has adopted and is following an institutional policy that will in fact cause it to remain fully in compliance with the law—the specific injunctive relief requested by Plaintiffs is described more fully in paragraph 17 above.

(C) Payment of costs of suit;

(D) Payment of reasonable attorneys' fees, pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 12205 and 28 CFR § 36.505, including costs of monitoring Defendant's compliance with the judgment (*see*

*Gniewkowski v. Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, Inc.*, Case No. 2:16-cv-01898-AJS (W.D. Pa. Jan. 11, 2018) (ECF 191) (“Plaintiffs, as the prevailing party, may file a fee petition before the Court surrenders jurisdiction. Pursuant to *Pennsylvania v. Delaware Valley Citizens’ Council for Clean Air*, 478 U.S. 546, 559 (1986), *supplemented*, 483 U.S. 711 (1987), the fee petition may include costs to monitor Defendant’s compliance with the permanent injunction.”); *see also Access Now, Inc. v. LAX World, LLC*, No. 1:17-cv-10976-DJC (D. Mass. Apr. 17, 2018) (ECF 11) (same);

(E) The provision of whatever other relief the Court deems just, equitable and appropriate; and

(F) An Order retaining jurisdiction over this case until Defendant has complied with the Court’s Orders.

Dated: December 3, 2021

Respectfully Submitted,

/s/ Benjamin J. Sweet

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